



He looked for a moment at the good man who stood waiting for him. . . . "Father! My dear old father!"

The Son of his Father

By Maurice Level
Illustrated by Harry Townsend

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HEN the last spadeful of earth had been shoveled in and the last handshake given, the father and the son went home, walking slowly, as if every step

were an effort. They were silent, for there had suddenly fallen on them the great weariness that results from an effort that has been too long sustained.

The house, still impregnated with the scent of flowers, calm again after the agonies, the comings and goings of the last few days, seemed strangely empty and new. The old servant who had come home before them had put all in order. They had the feeling of having returned after a long journey, but there was no joy in the home-coming, nothing of that deep sigh that means: "Ah! How good to be in one's own place again!" Yet outwardly all was as before. Curled up in a hall, a cat purred softly before the fire, and the winter sun shone with mild brightness on the window-panes.

The father sat down by the fire, shook his head and sighed:

"Your poor mother!"

Two tears rolled down the kind, round face that was a little congested by sorrow, the cold of the street, and the warmth of the room.

PRESENTLY, moved by the desire to hear something more than the purring of the cat, the tick-tock of the clock and the crackling of the wood in the grate, conscious, perhaps, of a kind of satisfaction in still being alive while others had gone forever, he began to talk:

"Did you see the Duponts? They were all there; the presence of the grandfather touched me very much. . . . Your mother was very fond of them all. . . . How was it your friend Bremard wasn't there?"

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she knew she couldn't get well. She told me to give it to you—when it was all over. . . . Here it is."

Surprised, he stopped and stared at her. She was looking at him in a curious, hesitating way; the fingers in which she held the envelope were trembling, and instantly he had the conviction that some great secret, some great sorrow, was about to be revealed to him.

His throat contracting, he said, "Give it to me," and went into the room.

Without noticing what he was doing, he turned the key in the door.

The room, the bed too flat, the curtains too far drawn, the grate fireless, and the furniture arranged in too orderly a way, had already a look of being dismused, deserted.

FOR some time he stood turning the letter about in his fingers, transfixed by the sight of the living handwriting of the dead woman, the dear, familiar writing that here on the slightly crumpled envelope showed itself less firm than usual.

Through a partition of curtained glass he could hear the comings and goings of the servant who was laying the table in the next room.

He tore open the envelope and read:

My beloved child:

I feel that the moment for the eternal farewell is very near. I go without fear, almost without regret, knowing you are a man now and for a long time have been able to get on without my help. My conscience tells me I have been the best of mothers. Yet a very grave secret lies between us, one I have never had the courage to tell you, but which it is essential you should know.

The woman you have so much loved and, above all, respected, she to whom you ran with every childlike trouble, (to whom you have (as concluded on page 75)

off that maid of ours, a human gorilla who'd pulled the girl out of her bed and had her over the side before I woke up to what was happening!"

"But who—" began Montie Neeland as he leaned out over the rail. He did not finish the sentence.

"I did!" proclaimed the meager man in the ironically spotless white uniform. There was a tremor of contentious indignation in his voice as he spoke. "I caught the black brute, caught him in the act. And I put a bullet through his head!"

The other man turned slowly about as someone aboard the yacht swung the hard white ray of the searchlight broadside on the *Paraketa*. He stood a motionless black silhouette as he once more stared down over the rail, absorbed in what he saw there.

"Stay back!" he said with singular sharpness as he became conscious of the fact

that Messa Rukeyser was stepping to his side.

But she disregarded that command. She stepped, fragile-bodied and grotesquely broadened, into the hard white light and stared down at the pitch-stained double-prowed barge with the square of ragged burlap covering it amidships.

There, flat on the rough planks, she saw a huge mahogany-brown figure, lying impulsive, in a posture of ineffable muckiness, with his pink-toed feet pointing upward and a pool of dark red widening about his averted face.

At the price that a good woman finds hardest to pay, he offered her safety. While she tried to choose, the drunken halfbreeds crept nearer. Watch for Arthur Stringer's "Snowblind."

The Father

(Concluded from page 22)

brought all the perplexities of your manhood—your mother, my darling—has been guilty of a great sin. You are not the son of the man you have always called father.

There has been in my life a great, an immense love, and my chief fault has been that I have never confessed it. Your father, your real father, is alive. He has watched you grow up, and he loves you. You are now old enough to decide the big things of life for yourself. You can completely change your life if you wish to do so. You can be rich tomorrow if you have the courage that has always failed me. I know I am doing a cowardly thing; but having acted so badly during my life, it seems inevitable I should end in the same way. A hundred times I have been on the point of leaving the house, taking you away with me. But I have not had the energy to do it. The slightest thing would have given me that energy: a suspicion, a harsh word. But there has never been anything; not a cloud . . .

He ceased reading, overcome by the revelation.

His mother had consistently deceived her husband! . . . She had been able to live a lie all these years. She had been able to go on talking and smiling without in any way betraying either her wrongdoing or any kind of repentance. And he, till now pitiless toward the weakness of women, he for whom all pride, all joy, all veneration had been summed up in the word "mother" had grown up there an intruder, a living insult to the good man whose attitude toward him had invariably been one of kindness, of tenderness! . . .

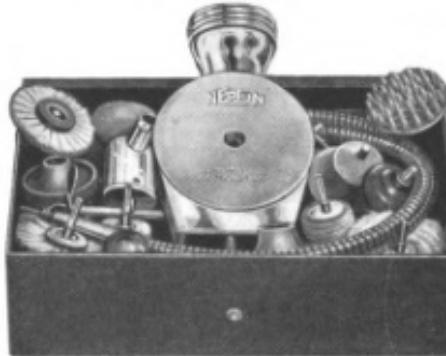
All his childhood rose before him. He saw himself again a tiny child walking about the street, clinging to his father's hand. . . . He grew older. . . . For months severe illness had held him between life and death, and he saw again his father sitting by his bedside, tears in his eyes as he tried to smile. . . . Time went on. Business troubles had come, and memories were of a still more touching kind: the conversations he had overheard at night after he had been tucked into bed; the mother very quiet; the father saying: "I will retrench in every possible way. I will give up smoking. I will give up cafés and my club. My clothes are still quite good. . . . Whatever happens, the child must not suffer. . . . The bad moment will soon pass. If I economize in every way we shall be able to prevent his feeling it. . . . These little ones have all their lives to suffer in—it is cruel to sadden them while they are young!"

And this was the man she had deceived.

He sat down and buried his head in his hands. A phrase in the letter came back to him: "You are old enough now to decide the big things of life for yourself."

It was true. He had not the right even to hesitate. The idea of money never crossed his mind. It was just a question of having the courage she had lacked. He would leave the house without saying anything about it. He would go away somewhere, far away, and never come back. In that way the shame, the shame that he now knew of, would go with him. How could he ever sit down again at that table without flushing as he heard the kind voice calling him "my dear boy," and talking fondly of the "poor mother"?

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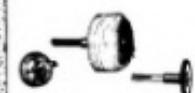
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